AMERICAN ROADSIDE ARCHITECTURE

The invention and mass production of the automobile transformed the lives of Americans and the landscape of the United States in the 20th century. During the 19th century, travel was cumbersome and expensive. Existing roads were mostly rough dirt paths and difficult to navigate. The predetermined routes and schedules of railroads or the slow pace of travel by horse and carriage, placed limitations on people anxious to explore the wonders of the country.

But all of this began to change as cars became affordable for millions of people, and good roads were built to accommodate the steadily increasing numbers of motorists now set free to discover the country on their own schedules and routes. The American free enterprise system responded, creating new types of businesses geared specifically to the needs of these "automobilists." "Moms and Pops" across the U.S. built facilities beside the highways to provide the necessities: gas, food, and lodging.

This new automotive architecture was very different from that found in the businesses downtown along America's Main Streets. Instead of small-scale design statements intended to attract pedestrians and slower traffic, distinctive and individualistic roadside buildings, often with huge signs proclaiming their presence, screamed for attention to attract those customers passing by at higher speeds. Their designs were a kind of visual shorthand intended to attract attention and to get customers to STOP.

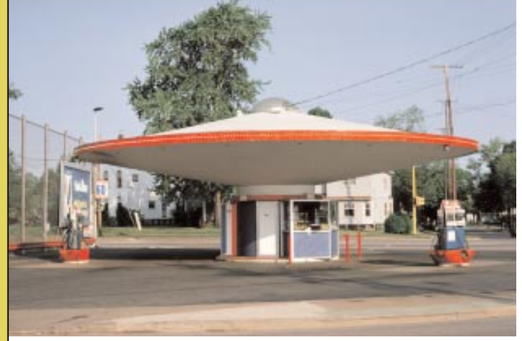
This inventive era in American roadside architecture began to come to an end in the 1950s as a new set of high-speed roads—the interstate highway system—was constructed, bypassing the old automotive highways. At the beginning of the 21st century the old roadside architecture has all but disappeared. New and homogenized chains have been built at the off-ramps of the interstates and on the outskirts of towns. Most of the old roadside businesses have closed and the buildings have been razed. Others remain standing, but in a state of decay.

For more than 25 years, architectural historian John Margolies has crisscrossed the continental United States, camera in hand, to capture and preserve images of this vanishing tradition in American commerce. The photographs seen here, gleaned from thousands of images taken during his 100,000-mile quest, present a portrait of a more innocent time in America, when business people could fulfill their American dreams by hanging out a sign by the roadside and make a good living by catering to the needs of the motoring public.

American Roadside Architecture has been organized by the Cultural Programs Division of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C. The exhibition is presented through the auspices of United States Embassies and Consulates General around the world.

JOHN MARGOLIES' photographic research has been funded in part by the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, a U.S. government agency. In 2003, the Alicia Patterson Foundation named Mr. Margolies a Josephine Patterson Albright Fellow in Photojournalism.

GAS

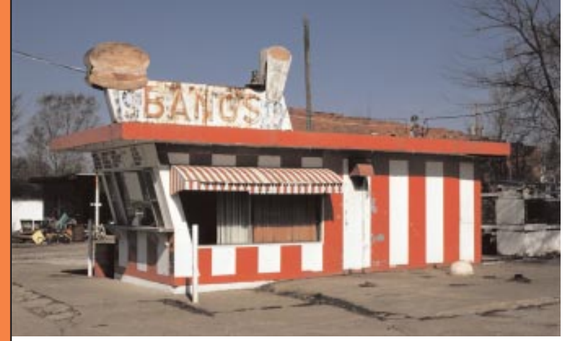


The most important necessity for keeping roadside adventurers moving along on their voyages of discovery was the gas needed to keep cars on the go. In the early 20th century horse-drawn tanks served motorists—or auto owners would bring barrels to a depot, fill them up, and store the gasoline at home—a dangerous idea under any circumstances. By the teens and '20s, gas pumps had been invented and perfected, and a new building type—the gas station—began to pop up here, there and everywhere along the American roadside.

Since there were no precedents for these structures, their builders had free reign to design them however they wished. Some chose to make them look like little houses, so they would fit into residential surroundings. Others opted for exotic architectural styles—medieval castles, Greek temples, and Japanese tea houses, to name just a few. Still others let their imaginations run free and shaped their outlets as huge sculptural versions of familiar and sometimes not-so-familiar representations of objects and buildings that had little if anything to do with dispensing gasoline. Gas stations shaped like airplanes, boats, lighthouses, teapots, teepees—you name it—attracted passersby in search of another tank of gas.

Many of these oddities survived into the late 20th century. But laws enacted in the early 1980s required the removal or replacement of underground gasoline storage tanks because of potential environmental harm from leakage of gasoline into the ground. Since replacement costs for these tanks was prohibitive, and because most of these gas station relics were located along now largely unused roads, the quaint gas stations we once knew have all but disappeared from the 21st century landscape.

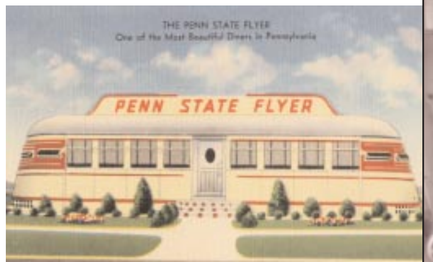
FOOD



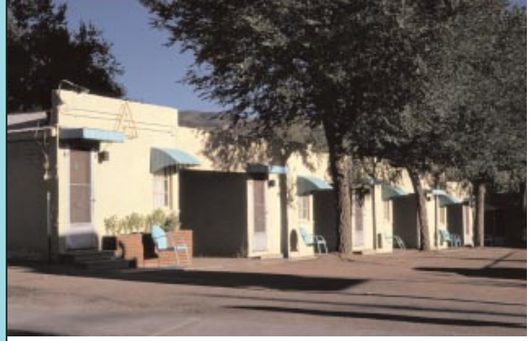
Food was the real fuel that kept people moving during automotive excursions. Facilities were designed to meet the special needs of this new type of hungry consumer. Expensive places with fancy food weren't suitable. Instead, inexpensive, short-order fare, quickly served, was at the top of most menus.

Billboards and signs were a major element in promoting a roadside eatery. Business owners competed to tempt motorists to stop at *their* business instead of the next one along the way. The buildings ranged from the ramshackle to the spectacular. Some were little more than shacks with outside counters while others were spectacular design statements. Diners, railroad car-shaped buildings, projected the aura and romance associated with having a meal in the dining car of a snazzy train. But the most spectacular eateries of all were the ones that incorporated oversized sculptural renditions of the food being offered. Giant hot dogs, ice cream cones, chickens, and coffee pots decorated roadside America, serving as lures to famished tourists.

Drive-ins were another innovation of the road. People could pull into a parking place, and without leaving their vehicles, a server, called a "car hop," would appear to take an order and then bring it out on a tray that attached to the door of the vehicle. In the 21st century, although an occasional idiosyncratic roadside statement can still be found, the prevailing reality is the predictable and very "fast" short-order meals offered by places like McDonald's and Burger King.



LODGING



In the early days, travel by automobile was messy and unpredictable. The new class of traveler needed someplace along the road to get a good night's sleep. Conventional hotels were inappropriate, as they were located in downtown areas where parking could be a problem. Very often they were fancy and expensive, unsuited to what, for even the most well-to-do motorists, was rough traveling. Many roads were still dirt tracks and frequently muddy. Touring cars were roofless, and travelers, exposed to nature, had to wear layers of protective clothing. And, even when motorists stopped for the night, they wanted to stay in close contact with their vehicles. An early solution was auto camping—travelers carried tents, sleeping and cooking gear and set up in fields or in camp-grounds along the highways. Others would attach tents and beds to the back of their cars. Auto camping worked, but it was complicated and time-consuming.

Soon, roadside entrepreneurs built small cabins, an easier solution. Drivers could pull their cars right up to a cabin—sometimes no more than a hut—and settle in for the night. These places became known as auto courts and then "motels" (a contraction of "motor" and "hotels"). Eventually, these individual cabins were conjoined in continuous lines to form the familiar motel solution of the mid-20th century. Nowadays, with most of the old motels and cabins along little-used highways, familiar lodging chains like Holiday Inns and Ramada Inns have successfully taken on the task of providing an excellent night's sleep at interstate off-ramps and on the edges of towns.